

JON CORBINO

EXHIBITION


March 22nd—April 11th, 1938

1. ROCKPORT FISHERMEN
2. CIRCUS PERFORMERS
3. REGATTA DAY
4. PARTY DRESS
5. ROCKPORT QUARRY
6. FISHERMEN
7. FLOOD DETAIL
8. THE WHITE POODLE—STUDY
9. STAMPEDING BULLS
Lent by The Toledo Museum of Art
10. TIGHT ROPE WALKER
11. FLOOD REFUGEES
12. GLOUCESTER FIESTA
13. BATHERS' PICNIC
Lent by The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
14. BUTCHER OF CAPE ANN
15. CIRCUS
16. ROCKPORT LANDSCAPE

In the South Room: Charcoal Drawings;
Cartoons and Studies, oil on paper.

"Harvest Festival," reproduced as the frontispiece in the Monograph, is included in the current exhibition of the National Academy of Design, 215 West 57th Street, where it has been awarded the Adolph and Clara Obrig Prize, National Academy of Design, March, 1938.

THE MACBETH GALLERY
11 EAST 57th STREET NEW YORK CITY



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by

E R N E S T B R A C E

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11 EAST 57th STREET NEW YORK CITY



"Harvest Festival." Awarded the Adolph and Clara Obbrig Prize, National Academy of Design, March, 1938.

JON CORBINO BY ERNEST BRACE

AFTER ONE has argued long and vehemently enough on any subject, whether immediately practical or remotely abstract, violence alone becomes the inevitable conclusion. Though the violence may be merely verbal it nevertheless offers the ultimate and necessary catharsis, not of course of the question discussed, but of the personal forces generated through disagreement. Today, whether one happens to observe social or political or strictly aesthetic conflicts, one finds without necessarily realizing the tendency or its cause that violence has become a more and more acutely desired relief from the tension of opposed forces. While such release cannot lessen the inescapable friction of differing opinion, it can and must free the static energy created by such friction. To point out therefore that that violence is assuming greater prominence as the subject matter of painting is merely to recognize the fact that painting is a part of contemporary living and completely sensitive to its moods.

Naturally much of the forcible action currently portrayed assumes the form of social conflict, sometimes forthrightly in scenes of war and civil strife, sometimes by implication in overwhelming contrasts between urban, industrial immensity and human frailty. Jon Corbino's painting quite ignores such more rationalized struggles and finds in violence itself an incentive, rather than an end or a moral. In his work, violence more often than not determines the architectural structure of the picture and assumes thereby a romantic unity of its own. The violence has no other meaning, no other purpose or conscious cause than aesthetic significance. "Rebellion" is not a pictorial representation of any particular uprising or political manoeuvre. The painter has never taken part in such a rebellion nor has he identified himself with any faction of idealism. The rebellion is movement and color and drama and therefore exciting subject matter. Where the horsemen are going or from what camp they come are dull footnotes to the exciting story of their movements.

Since the violence in Corbino's canvases has only incidental human motivation or social consequences, it is not surprising



"Flood." On Exhibition, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; First Biennial Exhibition, 1938.

to find that his interest in natural catastrophes is even more keen and sustained than in rebellion. As a matter of fact, in the picture bearing that title it is obvious that the bulging muscles and the natural movements of the horses are of far greater significance than the outcome of any battle. Last year Corbino did a series of paintings and drawings based upon his imagination of what might happen during an earthquake, and more recently, with last spring's floods stirring his fancy, he has been building his massive and rather classically conceived compositions upon that disaster. With no single and definite visual experience to determine his viewpoint, he works through a series of drawings and sketches and canvases, all portraying the same theme, and each representing an imaginative development of it. A sequence of large and strikingly competent drawings from models will finally be merged into a group frantically straining under the lash of calamity. And the canvases will themselves in turn suggest to him another, perhaps more exciting or comprehensive aspect of the same catastrophe.

Occasionally Corbino paints a still life or a peaceful land-



"Butcher of Cape Ann"

scape, but in going over reproductions of his work, even he became conscious of and spoke of the incongruity of a vase of flowers looking strangely still and secure among so many cataclysmic scenes. Actually, landscape as a pictorial end in itself does not interest him greatly, and even where it becomes a dark, threatening background to human struggle, it never is as completely realized as the dramatic action taking place before it. He tells of a broad, colorful Cape Ann landscape he recently painted and admits that his interest in it was not really excited until he decided to focus attention upon the slaughtering of a bull in the foreground.

One cannot help wondering how an artist who has spent most of his life in New York City is able to draw and paint horses and cattle with such authority and skill, where, indeed, he could ever have seen such sleek, powerful animals. For a few years Corbino worked in a camp upstate where he learned to ride and to take care of horses, and later he had charge for a while of a private stable stocked with prize-winners. Obviously he likes massive animals and he finds in their movements, in their irrational frenzies and their potential destruc-



"Flood Refugees"

tiveness, the same dramatic intensity that interests him in floods and earthquakes. In such a canvas as "Stampeding Bulls," for example, he gives unhampered freedom to the terrific force of the animals' bulging thighs and shoulders. He tells of going to a fair up in Massachusetts where he spends his summers and seeing a bull being led through a colorful crowd of people. The painting he imagined was of the bull loose and angry in the panic-stricken mob.

Like his animals, Corbino's human figures are muscular and vigorous. Their solid, heavy limbs are comparable to the thighs of a Percheron horse or a prize bull. Paintings of disaster usually stress the hardships and suffering and poverty of the victims, but Corbino's characters are of more heroic stuff. They are figures of romance, and in no way influenced or inspired by the candid camera. A drawing of an old woman being rescued from the flood by other women shows the muscular forms of a Michelangelo sybil rather than the more usual scrawny torso of industrial undernourishment. His victims have the bulk and vigor to fight their imminent disasters, or at least to confront them with straining energy.

Corbino was born in Italy, but he was brought to this country too young to carry away with him any conscious memory of Italian art. He received most of his technical training at the Art Students' League. Although he is still a young man he has been painting for many years, and he had his first one-man show in Ohio when he was eighteen. Not until recently, however, with the winning of a prize in Chicago and two years' backing by the Guggenheim Foundation, has painting opened up for him tangible prospects of a life-sustaining career. Until a few years ago he was perhaps better known as a sculptor than as a painter and exhibited his work in several outstanding group shows of sculpture. For the past three years, however, with his growing reputation as a painter, he has done nothing in stone and wood.

With so many of his contemporaries intent upon reality, or even busy distilling realism into surrealism, it is inevitable that Corbino's romantic conceptions should appear to stem directly from earlier protagonists. His massive women suggest



"Bather's Picnic." Awarded Walter Lippincott Prize, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; 1938; Purchased for the Permanent Collection.

Rubens, and his heroic, turbulent compositions, Delacroix. He denies any conscious influence, and certainly there is nothing artificial or superficially assumed in either his style of painting or his choice of subject matter. It is impossible to imagine him content with any less exuberant attitude toward his work. While other painters are laboring over the problem of a single figure in a landscape, Corbino creates crowds. Fairs, fiestas, circuses, where color and excitement and purpose add vigor to the movements of people, interest him especially. Practically all of his paintings are built around some focus of dramatic intensity. "Gloucester Fiesta" is a dense crowd of people dominated by the effigy of St. Peter. "Regatta Day," with its long line of sailboats, though less humanly intense than most of his work, is the beginning of a race. And always his drama is of the heroic, romantically objective sort that is pitched in a key of fine frenzy and never lapses into a sombre or skeptical note of realism.



"Stampeding Bulls." Permanent Collection, The Toledo Museum of Art.

The scale of his canvases and the gusto of his manner suggest, of course, that he would be interested in the broad scope and monumental possibilities of mural painting, but except for one experiment with the gabled wall of a friend's house in Rockport, he has done no murals. An opportunity to decorate the wall of a suburban post office came while he was interested in floods, and as this particular suburb had no exciting cataclysms to commemorate he decided not to take the job. The local, the typically American has little interest for him, and he found the prospect of trying to make something of the rural free delivery of mail or the stamping of letters completely boring.

The large, detailed drawings Corbino makes of the figures that are later incorporated into his tempestuous compositions offer overwhelming proof of his technical skill and virtuosity. They are sure, unequivocal realizations of striving human flesh. In them nothing is left to suggestion; they are the very antithesis of impressionism. Unlike far too many of his contemporaries he is never uncertain or labored in dealing with problems of human anatomy. Perhaps it is because of his training in sculpture that he conceives the human form so



"Circus"

completely as a tangible, active mass rather than a figure in repose or an added interest to landscape or city streets.

Corbino's problems are quite externalized; they are rather a striving toward realization than a preoccupation with alternatives. There are no symbols of introspection in his work. The mean streets, the frail figures, the towering masses of industrialism so familiar in present-day painting are as far from his world as recently discovered America was from that of Michelangelo. He does not feel the need of witnessing catastrophe in order to paint it, any more than Renaissance painters felt the need of visiting the Holy Land or seeing a crucifixion. The world he creates is his own and its dramatic intensity is a personal symbol rather than a record of experience. At times Corbino's enthusiastic use of violence seems to represent a defiance of all aesthetic argument and discussion of recent years. But whether he defies or ignores the "modern temper" there can be no doubt that he is a skilful and brilliant artist.

